

Hooray for Havana!

Faded, crumbling and 60 years after la Revolución, Cuba's once-notorious and time-frozen capital can still show a visitor a good time. The *Mirror* flies south for five days of local attractions, rum, dancing, male prostitution and "Chan Chan"

by ROXANE HUDON

I work in a cruel and failing business. Newspapers are closing and journalists are giving up. The few of us who are just starting are either doing it for free or have accepted that the small sums of money we do receive will only become more insignificant with time. But sometimes, like when I'm in Havana, sitting on the terrace of a luxury hotel I'm staying at for free, sipping a mojito that I haven't paid for, I think that actually, my life is pretty fucking awesome.

Two months ago, *Havana Club* sent two guys from Toronto (their PR person and a writer) and a writer from Montreal (me) to the Cuban capital for five days to experience the "real Havana"—its culture, its history and, most importantly, its rum (Montrealers can get a taste of Cuba this weekend at the *Havana Cultura* festival). Like many Quebecers, I'd been to Cuba before. The Caribbean is a rite of passage for us, like cherry picking in the Okanagan. My past Cuban experience included getting my hair braided and beaded, sipping margaritas and ending most of my nights salsa-dancing with some dude from Saskatoon. Needless to say, all I really knew about Cuba was that Al Capone and Ernest Hemingway used to party there, then there was some kind of revolution, then there was some kind of crisis, and then there was the Buena Vista Social Club. But in the five short days I spent there courtesy of *Havana Club*, I learned a lot.

I learned that "*Tengo resaca*" meant I was hungover, that Cubans aren't allowed to have Internet (!) and that people from Toronto love talking about restaurants. I learned that "Chan Chan" isn't really representative of Cuban music, that "all roads lead to rum" and that white people really are the stupidest travellers. I learned that

the hard way, somewhere between pouring a shot of *Jameson* on my face in front of a crowded bar and grinding a male prostitute. Apparently, I have no qualms with embarrassing myself in any country.

KICKING IT LIKE CORLEONE

I received my detailed itinerary a few days before leaving; the tour started every day at 10 a.m. and free time was scheduled some time between the third thing we visited and dinner. I never do tours; I usually just show up somewhere without a map or a clue and just go with the flow. Not that I'm some kind of bohemian nomad; I'm just a little bit lazy, a little bit of a drunk, and I don't particularly care for nice-looking buildings. Vacations shouldn't be stressful, gang. But still, I was thrilled that someone would be waiting for me at the airport, holding a sign with my name on it and ready to drive me to the Hotel Nacional de Cuba, a posh-looking historical building that stands on a hill by the sea and where Sir Winston Churchill, Frank Sinatra and, most importantly, the Mafia, were once guests. Sometimes, it's the simple things.

When I arrived late into the night, the room wasn't nearly as luxurious as the rest of the hotel, but there were four free bottles of *Havana Club* rum, chilled cans of Cristal beer, a housecoat and episodes of *Mob Wives* on VH1. And that's all the luxury I need. Waking early for the tour proved to be easy, because to satisfy its clientele with the right amount of Caribbean exoticism, the hotel is equipped with one hungry-looking peacock. And so, instead of gently awakening to a lovely tropical sea breeze flowing through my window, I woke up to a loud, angry bird cawing. After meeting up with my two Torontonians, we were introduced to our personal tour guide Osmin and our driver Augustin, two patient and sweet

Cuban men who showed us around for the entire week.

COMMIE LIVIN'

There may have been a revolution (which you're reminded of everywhere you go), but it seems like the city just froze in time. But instead of Americans profiting from the warm weather, cheap booze and beautiful Cuban people, it's Canadians and Western Europeans who do. Our guide spent a lot of time talking about the city's history while we visited Old Havana, old fortresses, churches and so on. But don't ask me anything about the Spanish War or whatever, because the most interesting bits to me were when our guide sat with us for lunch and opened up about modern Cuban life.

Tourism is Cuba's main source of revenue, and Cubans working in the industry can make more money in a day than they would in a month working any other job. Osmin was a teacher for 12 years before he became a guide. They have two currencies, the local pesos and the convertible pesos; they get

paid in local pesos, but have to buy most things in convertible pesos, which is also the currency used by tourists. Ironically, they can't even afford a bottle of *Havana Club*, except for very special occasions when they split the cost among friends. They can't access the Internet, except in specially designated centres, and must have a practical reason to do so, like for work or studying and, obviously, they are supervised. They don't own cars; most cars are state-owned and drivers must, by law, pick up hitchhikers. Cubans can't sell or buy homes, they can only swap (though new regulations are going to change that by the end of the year—thanks Raúl!). Aside from your typical communist state-controlled media, some foreign news is



also broadcast, but even if the reporters are speaking Spanish, the news is dubbed over by a Cuban to control the content. No one knows where Fidel is, even if you keep insisting. If ever there is a demonstration, they (the Communists) will send Cuban nationalists and the media will cover it as a party for the Revolution.

One day, while we were standing near the sea listening to Osmin, he stopped mid-sentence when a plane passed overhead. "That's the only thing that will interrupt two Cubans talking, because we wonder where it's going," he explained, because it's difficult (read: almost impossible) for Cubans to travel. And there's that silly embargo. The state still refers to the U.S. as "the Enemy," and all Cubans must do military service. With young-looking soldiers standing around in shoddy uniforms, one wonders exactly what they're defending.

CLUBBING, CUBA-STYLE

So far, it may sound like I was doing a lot of in-depth investigative work, but I'm not going to lie. Every visit began or ended with a mojito or a daiquiri. I have a hard enough time behaving like a responsible and professional journalist most of the time; imagine when I'm being fueled by rum.

When you're traveling with two grown men from Toronto who refer to themselves as "professional drinkers," it's not the best idea to think you can keep up with them. And so the first day, which began with everybody getting along and being quite polite, ended in a heated discussion (about sovereignty, don't ask) at a bar called Gato Tuerto (One-Eyed Cat), while a crooner, who could best be fake-named Paco Sinatra, serenaded us. Amused by Paco, with his gelled hair and Latino lover vibes, I decided to show him my appreciation the only way I know how, by stumbling on stage with shots of whiskey. Right after I poured mine on my chin instead of in my mouth, he shoved the mic in my face to sing along to "Guantanamera."

But that wouldn't discourage me from getting acquainted with two unavoidable elements of any trip to the Caribbean: reggaeton and pros-

titution. Conveniently, just down the road from our hotel was the Salón Rojo, a club that once was the party spot for rich criminals, but could now best be described as a place to pick up *jineteras* (Cuban slang for hookers) and check out salsa boy bands. For every old white man, there were about five young, beautiful Cuban women, gyrating with their hands in his pocket. Prostitution may still be banging, but only the huge chandelier and red carpeting remain from the glamour of the past. Or so I thought until I met Coco.

Covered in jewelry, wearing a flamboyant suit and an expensive pair of shades, he claimed to be the most "jet-set man in Havana" and refused to be photographed with me because he only took photos with Naomi Campbell and Kate Moss, who supposedly travel to

Cuba and party at the Salón Rojo. I usually hate schmoozing, but if I'm dealing with a self-proclaimed glamorous Communist, I'm going to work it, and I managed to convince him that I was some kind of minor celebrity in Canada (sure, in some circles, it could be argued).

It's only after his tall, muscular "friend" approached me and I indulged in a little bit of a, um, dance lesson that I understood two things: one, that Coco was just a poor, delusional Cuban pimp and two, grinding is not the best way to win an argument against sex tourism. Ladies, where there are *jineteras*, there are most definitely *jineteros*, and grinding is free of charge.

Of course, no adventure into the Havana nightlife would be complete without a visit to the infamous Tropicana cabaret, where over-the-top musical productions feature showgirls and boys, adorned in feathers and sequins. With its stages and neon signs that clearly haven't changed since its heyday as a gambling den for the Mafia in the 1950s, it's like stepping into some weird time warp, only the crowd has devolved from glamorous personalities and mobsters to Asian and German tourists, sipping on complimentary rum, eating entrées of questionable meats and thinking this is the

height of luxury.

BEYOND BUENA VISTA

To claim that I experienced the "real Havana" in five days would be a lie. It's hard to experience a city "for real" when you're part of a tour in a country where everything seems designated for the stupid traveller who just wants to be handed an endless amount of exotic cocktails, act the fool and hear "Chan Chan" over and over again. I'm not saying I acted any differently, but, in my defense, I pour shots on my face at home, too—it's, like, my thing. The grinding a male prostitute is a new thing. But between trying not to pass out at a cigar factory and sipping an expensive daiquiri at La Floridita (supposedly Ernest Hemingway's favourite bar), I do believe I saw glimpses of the real thing. There's a lot I haven't the space to mention; like how I experienced the best live jazz music I've ever heard, or how I ate fabulous Cuban food (it exists!) in restaurants tucked away in old colonial buildings or wealthier residential areas. But while there's something incredibly nostalgic and romantic about the city, there's also a thriving culture hidden underneath the surface.

On our last day in Havana, we were taken to Callejón de Hamel, a cultural project established by painter and sculptor Salvador González Escalona.

Wearing a bright pink blouse unbuttoned to reveal a prominent, tanned belly, Escalona poured rum into a carton of juice, introduced himself and guided us around the project. He basically turned a street into a work of art; every wall is painted, junk has been transformed into weird installations and old bathtubs are used as benches. After the visit, he brought us into his home, lit some incense, offered us drinks and explained how he transformed a dirty alley and a pile of rubble into something beautiful. Before we left, he asked a musician hanging around to play for us. He started to sing, while another man played the bongo.

Slowly, other men hanging around the canteen joined in, men who'd been playing dominoes or standing further away were suddenly holding instruments. Maybe it was all a masterful ploy to hand

us CDs after the song, maybe it was just the rum buzzing in my head, but as they sang around us, I thought this was it, this is Havana. And when the singer extended his hand to invite me to dance in the middle, I refused. In a brief moment of clarity, I thought if ever there was a moment where I should stand back and try not to embarrass myself, this should definitely be it. ■



JACQUELINE HILSON



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ESSENTIAL TO-DOS: (Clockwise from top) Stroll the Malecón, visit Salvador Gonzalez Escalona at Callejón de Hamel, grind (like the author, left) with jinetero



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